

The Leadership Role Of the Company Executive Officer

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Leadership, according to the Army's operations doctrine, is the most essential element of combat power, "the process of influencing others to accomplish the mission by providing purpose, direction, and motivation." The 10 principles of leadership provide additional guidance:

- Know yourself and seek self-improvement.
- Be technically and tactically proficient.
- Seek responsibility and take responsibility for your actions.
- Make sound and timely decisions.
- Set the example.
- Keep your subordinates informed.
- Develop a sense of responsibility in your subordinates.
- Ensure that the task is understood.
- Build the team.
- Employ your unit in accordance with its capabilities.

The Army identifies specific traits, standards, and actions that are necessary for a successful leader; and it includes these same traits, standards, and actions as critical elements of evaluation reports for both commissioned and noncommissioned officers. Yet Army leaders, all too often, measure their success solely by the principles of leadership and by the often-heard "BE, KNOW, DO."

Like his commander, a platoon leader is in a direct leadership role. He must lead his platoon to accomplish its mission by providing purpose, direction, and motivation, or the *why*, the *what*, and the *will*. Both the platoon leader and the commander often must give their soldiers the *why* under dangerous circumstances. The commander delivers the direction, or the

what, in a very detailed five-paragraph operations order. The platoon leader, like all successful leaders, gives soldiers the motivation, the *will*, to accomplish their mission.

The organization of the Army does not allow every officer to be in a direct leadership role; battalions have staffs, and companies have executive officers. But Army doctrine on leadership seems to ignore staffs and executive officers. (The only publication available on the subject—Field Manual 101-5, *Staff Organizations and Operations*—deals entirely with structure.)

A former platoon leader who becomes a company XO therefore experiences a drastic change. He is no longer responsible for directly providing purpose and motivation to a platoon. Instead, he coordinates logistics, maintenance, medical, and food service support. The only time he exercises a direct leadership role is when the commander is absent.

Because day-to-day operations of the Army involve interface between personnel, all Army leaders use some form of direct and indirect leadership, and the Army does address indirect leadership at the senior level. Senior leaders work with fewer people and a greater number of things. Staffs and executive officers, because of their limited interaction with personnel, must also rely primarily on an indirect leadership style. The company XO, although not in a senior position, fits into this category.

The Army's leadership doctrine is based on four factors that are always present: *The led, the leader, the situation, and communications*. Too often, the fo-

cus is on the leader (the Army tends to get wrapped up in what the leader must BE, KNOW, and DO), but the other three factors are equally important. The company XO can take this foundation for the Army's leadership doctrine and adapt it to his situation:

The Led. The first major factor is the soldiers the XO is responsible for leading. Each soldier is different:

- The supply sergeant, usually the veteran member of a company headquarters section, is a knowledgeable professional who understands his job, and the XO's as well.

- The communication sergeant and the nuclear, biological, chemical (NBC) sergeant are also knowledgeable professionals in their fields, but they are often relatively junior NCOs with limited experience in staff operations.

- The training sergeant is usually chosen by the commander and works directly with him, while the XO assists with tough missions.

- The armorer and the motor sergeant are the least knowledgeable and usually the most junior members of the headquarters section; they fill their positions because of qualification, interest, or ability.

With this staff, the XO must create a climate that encourages participation and initiative. He must show the staff his confidence, respect, and trust; and he must see that they get the appropriate written counseling, performance appraisals, and awards.

The Leader. The second major factor of leadership is the leader himself. A company XO usually has trouble relin-

quishing this leader aspect. He often tries to assert authority over the platoon leaders and tries to run his staff the same way he ran his platoon. The XO may not be able to apply all of the principles and attributes of BE, KNOW, DO; his job is very technical, and he may have to rely more on the staff.

The Situation. In addition to getting used to a professional staff of sergeants, an XO must also adapt to the situation. He cannot expect to have as much control over the staff as he did over a platoon. For one thing, the XO's staff is not a formal organizational unit, and he has no explicit control over the commodity area sergeants. Leadership techniques that proved effective for a platoon leader often result in failure for an XO. The XO's job changes from day to day. The situation may require immediate action, or it may require a group effort from a collaborating staff. The situation often allows the XO to correct his mistakes and learn from them.

Communication. Communication is the factor of leadership that can make or break a company XO. To a platoon leader, effective communication implies that the soldiers listen to him and understand him. But an XO must have two-way communication channels. The staff members must understand precisely what he is trying to tell them, and he must understand

precisely what they are trying to tell him. A good climate for communication consists of a reliable source, a clear and concise message, and a position of response.

An XO needs to rely on communication with his staff. Since it is difficult for him to get the diverse commodity area proponents together for a single meeting, he must establish a method of keeping up with all the areas. One technique is an organizational chart with places for messages. Another is a list of detailed responsibilities so that all communications are written in report or memorandum format.

Communication does not stop with reports and information but goes on to perceptions and expectations as well. An XO needs to be concerned with suggestions, dislikes, understandability, discussion, and the distribution and filing of reports.

A company XO who uses management by objectives in his planning and organization has all the prerequisites for functioning communication. This kind of management gives the intended recipient of communication access to the experience that enables him to understand and execute the mission.

These four major factors of leadership are always present, but the focus shifts drastically as an officer goes from platoon leader to executive officer. The most important of these factors for a platoon

leader may be the leader element, while the most important factor for an XO is probably communications. Every task and mission is a different situation that requires a different leadership approach.

Although the Army has not addressed company XOs with its leadership doctrine, the XO cannot let this hinder his mission accomplishment. Through self-assessment, study, and experience, he will improve the understanding of his leadership role.

The XO may be concerned with purpose, direction, and motivation, but an experienced professional staff presents him with unique opportunities—staff members' understanding of their purpose, the direction of what they must do, and their self-motivation. The XO, on the other hand, may be more concerned with communicating necessary information and the situation at hand. By combining his talents and experience with the skills and motivation of the staff, he can produce a team that can best support the unit, its leader, and its soldiers.

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